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ABSTRACT

Concerned with the means by which distance education programs can be used to further social justice in various parts of the world, this paper considers both the generally recognized strengths of and some potential problems in three aspects of such programs--access, curriculum, and a monopolistic tendency. It draws on the experience of the Universidad Estatal a Distancia in Costa Rice to show that distance education can widen access to educational opportunities and particularly to the home-based learner. The author cautions, however, that it can also be used to control physical access to education and thus force the student to be an isolated, segregated home-based learner. Arguing that distance education can be used as a vehicle to spread education and enlightenment, the document points out that such programs are also potentially a powerful means of propaganda and distortion. The high start-up costs of large-scale multimedia institutions are cited as the reason for current monopolistic tendencies, since most countries cannot afford to set up more than one at any educational level. It is also suggested that these costs may result in the development of more multinational institutions to serve the needs of several countries. Some of the problems such institutions can encounter are briefly noted, citing the experiences of the University of South Pacific, which reaches students from three different cultural groups speaking diverse languages, and the Instituto Centroamericano de Extencion de la Cultura, which operates in the politically sensitive region of Central America. Twenty references are listed. (LMM)

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The contribution of distance education in providing education for a just social order

A paper presented to the Fourth Triennial World Conference on Education of the World Council for Curriculum and Instruction

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Edmonton, Canada, 26 July - 4 August, 1983

by

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What is distance education?

This paper is concerned with distance education programmes, and in particular the means by which such programmes can further social justice.

Distance education is a generic term that includes the range of teaching/learning strategies variously referred to as correspondence education or correspondence study or independent study in the United States of America; external studies in Australia; tele-enseignement in France; Fernstudium or Fernunterricht in Germany; educacion a distancia or ensenanza a distancia in Spanish speaking countries and teleducacao in Portugese. Related terms such as open learning, non-traditional studies, out-reach and off-campus programmes, and telemathic teaching also appear in the literature. The meaning of these various terms has been discussed by Moore (1977), Holmberg (1980) and Keegan (1980). These methods are usually contrasted with conventional or traditional forms of education.

Distance education has been proposed as the general term for this whole area of education. Distance teaching would then refer to the institutional role of providing education at-a-distance, and distance learning to the students' role in the process.

Keegan (1980: 33) suggests that the main elements in any definition of distance education are:

* The separation of teacher and learner which distinguishes it from face-to-face lecturing.
* The influence of an educational organisation which distinguishes it from private study.
* The use of technical media, usually print, to unite teacher and learner and carry the educational content of the course.
* The provision of two-way communication so that the student may benefit from or even initiate dialogue, which distinguishes it from other uses of educational technology.
* The teaching of students as individuals and rarely in groups, with the possibility of occasional meetings for both didactic and socialisation purposes.

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* The participation in a more industrialised form of education (based on the view that distance teaching is characterised by division of labour; mechanisation; automation; application of organisational principles; scientific control; objectivity of teaching behaviour; mass production; concentration and centralisation).

Distance education: a means to a more just social order?

In this paper I want to consider the extent to which distance education systems can contribute towards a more just social order.

Firstly, access. Distance educators believe that they can open up educational opportunities to groups previously denied access, and I discuss this proposition, drawing on the experience of the Universidad Estatal a Distancia in Costa Rica. Access to education is related to the degree to which it is practicable for an individual to avail himself or herself of the learning facilities provided. Distance and other geographical constraints and the ability to have access to the teaching medium in use are factors here, so that "openness of access is positively and highly correlated with the extent to which an institution is dedicated to distance learning" (Neil, 1981: 37). Clearly, it can be argued that insofar as distance education opens up access, it may contribute to building a more just social order. However, it is also possible to view distance education as a means of restricting access - of imposing isolation on the student - and I shall very briefly discuss this problem.

Secondly, the curriculum. Clearly the media can be and has been used to great benefit, and I shall refer briefly to a number of projects to show how this has been done. But there is, I suggest, a thin dividing line between effecting change in behaviour to the benefit of the target group, and effecting the way people think and perceive the world. For good or evil, distance education has the potential to be a powerful vehicle for propaganda.

Thirdly, I shall mention briefly what I perceive to be the monopolistic tendency of distance education, and I shall suggest that we may increasingly see multinational distance teaching organisations, with the implications these may have for cultural identity. It is not a field with which I am particularly familiar, but I suspect that distance educators will shortly have to face these implications.

Distance education as a means of providing access to educational opportunities

Perhaps the most important contribution of distance education is its ability to provide accesss to education for those who would otherwise be denied it.

Distance education can help to overcome a shortage of places in the conventional education system, and hence meet a social demand for education from those who are of an age and qualified to participate, but may otherwise be denied a place. The ability to do this derives from the economies of scale inherent in the method, so that, for the same financial outlay, more places can be provided by distance than by conventional means.

There are those who for one reason or another cannot or choose not to personally attend a conventional school, college, or university. They may not be able to afford the fees to attend; the facilities may be too far away for them to be able to travel to the classroom; and they may not be able to study at fixed hours. Here again, distance education provides an alternative means of access because it is well suited to the needs of those students who have to study on a flexible

part-time basis in their own homes; and it is financially easier for students to have a full-time job at the same time as they are studying, and hence, in the absence of grants, pay their own way through school.

Distance education systems can also reach adults who are in full-time work and/or have family responsibilities, and who may not have had the chance in the past to complete their education, or who, having done so, now wish to retrain in a new subject area or gain additional qualifications. In such circumstances distance education systems are clearly widening access and contributing towards a more just social order.

An example of the way in which a distance teaching institution can meet previously unfulfilled needs is provided by the Universidad Estatal a Distancia in the Republic of Costa Rica, Central America. During the 1960s the principle that education is a basic component in economic development gained widespread acceptance. Surveying the need for educated manpower, the Office for Higher Educational Planning (OPES) within the National Council of Rectors (CONARE) projected a shortfall in places at the existing universities and in the number of graduates being produced in some fields (agriculture, public service and administration, commerce, health and education). OPES called for (1) the diversification of academic programmes offered by the universities; (2) the decentralisation of higher education through the establishment of university centres, so that persons living outside the small Central Valley region (where the three conventional universities are situated) could have greater opportunities of access without the need to move to the area or travel long distances; and (3) for an increase in opportunities for in-service training (CONARE 1975). OPES also proposed the establishment of a distance teaching university that would not only open up educational opportunities to new target populations but would also alleviate the pressure of social demand for entry to the campus-based universities.

These plans were realised with the foundation, in 1977, of the Universidad Estatal a Distancia, a distance teaching university using correspondence texts, broadcasting, face-to-face tuition, and telephone tuition, to teach degree and diploma courses to distance students.

Surveying the achievements of the Universidad Estatal a Distancia in 1981, three years after its creation, Rumble and Borden (1983) assessed the University's impact in relation to (1) student demand; (2) demand from disadvantaged sections of society; and (3) the country's needs for trained manpower.

Firstly, demand for higher education in Costa Rica exceeds the number of places available at the conventional universities (CUs). There is evidence that a number of students who sit for the CU entrance examination do subsequently apply to enter UNED, and that while some of those who are admitted to the CUs choose to come to study with UNED, others had either not applied for entry to the CUs or had failed to get in. Thus UNED provides another avenue for entry to higher education.

contd./.....

Sample of UNED entrants, first semester of 1980

		%
N =	427	100
Previously sat conventional university entrance examinations	210	49.2
Passed CU entrance exams but chose to come to UNED instead	129	30.2
Failed CU entrance exam and came to UNED	81	19.0
Did not take CU entrance examinations	193	45.2
No response	24	5.6

Secondly, a number of new students in UNED (16.6 percent of those first registering in the first semester of 1978 and 11.5 percent of those first registering in the second semester of 1978) are CU drop-outs. In an educational system where drop-out rates are high, UNED provides a 'second chance' for students to gain a degree.

But it is the social implications of UNED that are most interesting. Firstly, the distance mode of study is opening up new opportunities for higher education in geographical areas not previously served by other universities, while even in those towns with university centres, the presence of UNED involves a widening of curriculum opportunities. Eighteen of UNED's twenty-seven academic centres are located in towns with no other University facilities. It is the only university offering higher educational opportunities in the "frontier" zones of the north and south of Costa Rica; and, while most of UNED's students still come from the Central Valley region, it has a higher proportion of students coming from the 'marginal' coastal provinces of the Atlantic and Pacific seaboards than any of the conventional universities in Costa Rica.

Secondly, one can compare the socio-economic class of UNED's students with those at CUs. Direct comparison is difficult because UNED's students are on the whole older than CU students and already working, and have begun to make their own way in the world, whereas the socio-economic class of CU students is still related to that of their parents. The evidence available shows that UNED's students have a relatively high economic status as indicated by their profession (they are overwhelmingly drawn from the professional, technical and white collar classes), and by their income (only 12.8 percent earned less than 2000 colones per month, broadly the level below which a person is placed in the lower socio-economic class, whereas 35.1 percent of students at the prestigious University of Costa Rica came from families with a monthly income of under 2000 colones).

However, this may not be the whole story. Evidence from the British Open University shows that while the University attracts relatively few applicants from 'working class' occupations (only about 10 percent come from the skilled trades, other manual, communications and transport groups), and while only a minority appear "to have been genuinely disadvantaged at the initial level (of education)", the educational background of the parents of Open University students appears to be similar to that of the adult population as a whole, and that this is in marked contrast to the parental background of conventional university students which is

biased towards the middle and upper classes (McIntosh and Calder, 1975: 113, 133, 137-40). As Woolfe (1977: 80) put it, "the major impact of the Open University seems to be in providing a second chance to people who are already socially mobile and who have already aspired to non-manual jobs mainly through the acquisition of educational qualifications". Whether students at the Universidad Estatal a Distancia are also legitimising their own upward socio-economic mobility is not known, but clearly one needs to consider the social mobility of adult students before one can draw conclusions about the degree to which distance education systems catering for adult needs are also democracising educational opportunities.

Thirdly, there is the question of age, marital status and work. In Costa Rica, there is no evidence of marked discrimination against women so far as access to university is concerned, and the higher proportion of males in UNED (53.6 percent in the second semester of 1979) may reflect the nature of the degree programmes offered and traditional societal views about a woman's role, rather than any conscious discrimination. What is clear is that a significant proportion of UNED's women students (24.3) percent of those admitted in the second semester of 1979) are housewives, and hence one can say that UNED is providing an opportunity for house-bound women. What is also clear is that UNED's students are generally older than CU students (40.7 percent were aged over 27 compared with only 19.4 percent aged over 25 in the University of Costa Rica); more likely to be married (44 percent compared with 19.3 percent at the University of Costa Rica); and more likely to be employed (75.4 percent compared with 32.4 percent at the University of Costa Rica).

While not all Distance education systems cater for large numbers of students, they can potentially provide educational materials to large numbers. Distance teaching universities like the Central Radio and Television University in Beijing, People's Republic of China, which enrolled 273000 students in 1979, and another 144,000 in 1980, are sizeable projects, as is the British Open University which had 63,100 undergraduates, 7,150 associate students and 16,400 short-course students in 1982. Spanish speakers talk of the "masificacion" of education, expressing in a single word a concept which it is difficult to render in English, but which seems to encapsulate what distance education systems can achieve.

Related to the whole question of access is the question of open admissions - by which I mean the lack of any imposed formal educationa requirements restricting access to those who are deemed to be suitably qualified. Distance education systems may have an open admissions policy (as does the British Open University), but this has nothing to do with the fact that it is a distance education system, and I do not intend to discuss the issue here.

It should be said that distance education systems can undermine the extent to which they are accessible to students by, for example, setting fee levels which students cannot meet, and hence, effectively pricing themselves out of the market; or by choosing to use teaching media which potential students do not or can not have access to - so that an institution which in theory ought to be accessible to the distant, home-based, part-time student may in fact be closed. Generally speaking, where this happens it is a question of bad policy or bad planning, although obviously it could be construed as a tactic to give greater opportunities to better-off sections of the urban population, at the expense of the rural and urban poor.

Distance education as a means of controlling access to campus-based institutions

It is a feature of distance education systems that the students may be isolated from each other. Distance educators recognise this as the problem of the long-distance learner. To some extent it is inevitable. Distance learning is, after

all, primarily a home-based activity, and this is one of its advantages. However, most distance teaching institutions try to get round this problem by ensuring that students meet - at residential schools or study centres. But the isolation of the distance learner can have another, darker side. For instance, Cyril Houle noted (1974: 41) that many non-South Africans are tempted to believe that the distance teaching University of South Africa "is an instrument of apartheid because correspondence interaction is a method ideally suited to such a purpose". In Colombia, a distance teaching project in the University of Antioquia was opposed on the grounds that an expansion of distance-teaching was felt to imply fewer on-campus students and a dispersion of student power leading to the depoliticisation of the student body (James and Arboleda, 1979: 272). And, finally, critics of the Free University of Iran alleged that it too had been established, in the days of the Shah, to prevent the further concentration of students on conventional campuses in Tehran and other Iranian cities.

Distance education - a means of controlling the curriculum?

I now turn to the question of the use of distance education to control the curriculum.

According to Sims (1977: 4), "the unique and distinguishing feature in the correspondence education process is that the learner is at a distance from the teacher for much, most or even all of the time during the teaching-learning process". Distance teaching institutions therefore rely to a large extent on mass produced packages of knowledge, so that some critics have argued that distance teaching is over-structured and that the student runs the risk of being turned into a passive consumer of "educational commodities - such as packets of knowledge and educational certificates" (Harris, 1976: 44).

Keegan, in defining distance education, held that a feature of such systems is that students are taught as individuals and rarely in groups. The use of technical media, either print or broadcast, to encapsulate a message is a feature of distance education systems, and it is the technical media that are usually stressed by those working in distance education systems.

In a paper on some possible limitations of distance education, Tom Kaye, an ex-Open University part-time tutor, listed some of the problems of distance education as he had experienced them. These included the isolation of the student from libraries and books other than the University provided course material and prescribed textbooks.

Kaye (1981: 238) admits to his unease at this situation, for given well constructed and self-sufficient correspondence texts, the student can study without ever coming to grips with inconsistencies of style, differences of presentation, apparent or real contradictions of data, and genuine theoretical and/or ideological conflicts.

To these limitations on the student, Kaye adds the limitations of being a distance teacher. The distance teacher, he contends, is not unlike a disc jockey. He sits enclosed in his working place, surrounded by his resources but cut off from the outside world, presenting his pre-selected programme to the accompaniment of appropriate comments but without any direct feedback from his clients" (Kaye, 1981: 241). He itemises these limitations as follows:

* the tendency of the distance teacher, in drawing up his programme, to start from the assumption that he is himself the sole arbiter of what material shall reach his students and - just as importantly - what should not.

* the temptation for the distance teacher to select only those parts which seem to be directly relevant to the course topics and to omit references which cannot, in any case, be followed up by the distance student.

* the pressures to produce pre-digested material so that the course is presented in bite-sized gobbets, each part of it edited in such a way that it raises only a limited number of questions.

* having regard to the isolated student, the tendency to help the distance student more than the conventional one by providing thinking guidance in the form of carefully-defined objectives, in-text quizzes with multiple-choice answers, programmed question-and-answer sections, and other devices to ensure that the student thinks the way the teachers think he or she should thing (Kaye, 1981: 241-245).

Such criticisms are in danger of denying the good points of distance education systems: that academic course writers and curriculum designers are asked to specify the aims and objectives of each course; that the material provided is designed to meet those objectives; and that the quality of the material is far more likely to be assured, particularly if it is subject to criticism by external assessors or fellow academic course writers. These features seem to me to be positively beneficial.

The second strand of Kaye's argument is that distance education courses can be over-packaged and intentionally biased in outlook. In fact, courses are often developed by more than one person; set books are prescribed; students are recommended to read other books; and the person developing the materials is often different from the one who tutors the student. A diversity of views is therefore assured. Kaye's criticisms imply a degree of consistent bias on the part of all those involved, a unity of purpose, and a system of control, that would be very difficult to institute.

Kaye is not the only person to be concerned. Miguel Escotet, who worked for the Venezuelan Universidad Nacional Abierta, has argued that distance teaching is in effect providing distance instruction (the transfer of information) and cannot provide distance education (which implies a social and cultural contact) (Escotet, 1980: 11-12, 15-17).

Most commentators accept that distance teaching is an effective means of transmitting intellectual knowledge, and that most subjects can be taught by this means. Some pyscho-moter objectives such as surgery or the capacity to handle dangerous chemicals and machinery do not lend themselves to distance study, and again this is generally accepted. Criticism of distance education tends to focus on its effectiveness in the affective domain, which is concerned with values, attitudes and beliefs that are 'caught' rather than 'taught'. Many people argue that they can only be 'caught' in a social context, and that this element is not present in distance education systems. In fact, most distance teaching systems also involve an element of interpersonal contact, but even if they did not, it can be argued that just as novels, poetry, plays, and television and radio drama, etcetera can have a strong appeal to the emotions, so it should be possible to devise distance teaching materials which will also teach in the affective domain.

These features of distance education suggest that it can be used purposely to form attitudes and beliefs. Of course, media-based projects in the field of adult non-formal education often explicitly intend to change the attitudes and beliefs of adult participants, and there is considerable evidence that those who

participate in non-formal media-based projects in Third World countries show different sets of attitudes and behaviours from those who do not (Eicher et al,1982: 101).

Many of the changes effected by such programmes are engineered for the benefit of the target audience. The extremely effective radio campaigns in Tanzania - like the 1973 campaign "Mtu ni Afya" ("Man is Health") which urged local groups to build latrines, to buy mosquito nets or malaria tablets, or to dispose of rubbish clearly had aims and objectives which are wholly laudable, and reached 2 million people (Hall and Dodds, 1974). In Botswana, the Botswana Extension College developed a "Skills for Development" programme aimed at women, using print and radio, and locally recruited change agents within the villages. In Pakistan, the Functional Education programme at the Allama Iqbal Open University has prepared courses on vegetable growing, aime at urban and semi-urban householders; soil problems and plant protection, aimed at literate farmers and small-holders; poultry farming, aimed at literate rural and urban householders; and tractor repair and maintenance, aimed at literate mechanics and rural tractor owners. At another level, community education projects such as the Open University's short courses on Racism in the workplace and the community and on Nuclear weapons: the effects of their use in war encourage reflection on personal experience, while the same University's undergraduate course on Third World Studies does much to dispel myths and increase understanding of the problems Third World countries and of "North-South" interaction.

Nevertheless, there is a narrow dividing line between changing peoples' attitudes and beliefs in ways which are beneficial, and result in changed practices, and changing the way in which they think and perceive the world. The features which Kaye identifies in distance education systems, if true, lend themselves to distortions of knowledge and truth, and the suppresion of free inquiry. Even the British Open University, it has been alleged, "has been running a number of courses which have been so politically biased and intellectually weak as to cause great disquiet" and some of its courses have been publically criticised in the press for "the familiar one-sidedness of social and political criticism which concentrates on the defects and problems of capitalist societies while neglecting any comparably critical analysis of socialist alternatives" (Cox and Marks, 1982: 80). But it is precisely the open-ness to public scrutiny and criticism which acts as a safeguard against the misuse of distance education systems, so that, in the unlikely event that there is a conspiracy to bias the teaching by the staff of an institution, what is taught cannot be hidden behind closed doors.

I do not wish to debate whether or not some of the Open University's courses are biased. They are, unlike traditional teaching, widely available to the public in their printed and broadcast form and so peculiarly subject to scrutiny. Inevitably, some of the courses - particularly those which deal with 'political' issues - are open to criticism from individuals holding different views. It is sufficient to say that the Open University is confident that, through internal checks and rigorous external assessment, it ensures that its courses are both balanced and academically honest.

Nevertheless, what cannot be denied is that in a closed society distance education could be a peculiarly effective tool for propaganda in the guise of education, particularly if students are unable to meet together, or with tutors, to question the facts and opinions which they are given.

In fact most distance education systems have some form of interpersonal contact. It has been argued by Sewart (1981: 12) that the success of a distance education system rests upon a correct balance between distance teaching (the development of

high quality learning materials) and distance learning (comprehensive support for student learning from the materials provided). Thus many distance education systems have placed considerable emphasis on the provision of study centres - by hiring facilities (as does the British Open University) or building their own local facilities (as did the Free University of Iran), or providing mobile campers fitted up as a tutor's home-cum-study centre (as does North Island College in British Columbia).

Multinational Distance Education Systems: problems in the making

Finally, I want to turn to the question of internationalism and the growth of the multinational distance education systems.

The majority of distance education systems operate within the national territory of one country. Some, however, also offer their courses to students resident abroad. The British Open University has for many years offered some of its courses to British Ministry of Defence personnel and their dependents in British bases in Cyprus and the Federal Republic of Germany. More recently the University has begun to offer some of its courses to British nationals resident in Brussels, where the headquarters of the European Community is based. Also there have always been a number of students who are resident abroad who take its courses. Similarly, about one percent of the students of Spain's Universidad Nacional de Educacion a Distancia are resident abroad, mostly in Western Europe; about two percent of the students of the Fernuniversitate-Gesamthoschule in the Federal Republic of Germany live abroad, mainly in Austria and Switzerland; and the University of South Africa also makes arrangements for students resident abroad.

A few distance education sytems set out to be multinational in their coverage. One of the best known, perhaps, is the University of South Pacific which utilises a satellite network and distance education methods to provide pre-university level courses, teacher education and re-education courses, and individual degree level courses to eleven island states in the South Pacific embracing three cultural groups - Polynesian, Micronesian and Melanesian. In an interesting paper, Griffin (1981) has listed some of the cultural problems involved, including the use of English as the language of instruction in a multi-linguistic setting, with the danger that freedom, critical thinking and self-determination may be affected; and the use of distance teaching means of communication which fail to provide visual signals to the listeners and which do not allow for the face-to-face communication which is so important in these cultures. As Griffin shows, multi-national amd multi-cultural distance teaching faces particular problems. However, there is an added problem which can arise, and which is exemplified in the work of the Instituto Centroamericano de Extencion de la Cultura, which is based in San Jose, Costa Rica, but operates in the countries of Central America and in Panama. As an integral part of its teaching system, the Institute encourages students to raise problems with its staff, which are personally answered by letter. Problems which seem to be common to a number of individuals are then taken up and discussed in radio programmes and in the Institute's yearly Almanack. In a region peculiarly subject to political pressures, the Institute has at times to tread a careful path to avoid antagonising the left or the right while upholding the basic Christian principles and respect for human rights and dignity which are the basis of its philosophy.

There is nothing particularly new about teaching students resident in another country. Commercial correspondence colleges have done this for years, preparing students for examinations that are validated in another country. The use of new educational media, and particularly broadcasting linked to the use of satellites, has raised questions about the 'violation' of national integrity in respect of

education, and the problems of cultural imperialism.

Whether the number of multinational distance education systems will grow remains to be seen. The Vice-Chancellor of the Fernuniversitat, Dr Otto Peters, has stressed the fundamental differences in didactic structures between conventional and distance education. His theoretical analysis led him to conclude that:

> Anyone professionally involved in education is compelled to presume the existence of two forms of instruction which are strictly separable: traditional face-to-face teaching based on interpersonal communication and industrialised teaching at a distance, which is based on an objectivised, rationalised, technologically-produced interaction.
> (Peters, 1973: 310)

He also argued that there is a built-in tendency for distance education systems to become monopolistic, in part because the high start-up costs of large-scale multi-media distance education institutions makes it impractical to consider the establishment of more than one of them at any one educational level in all but the largest countries. The high start-up costs also suggest economic advantages to be gained by establishing a multi-national institution to serve the needs of several countries. Finally, there are the pressures to expand, not just to meet the needs of one's nationals living in other countries, but to find markets for one's educational materials. Given these tendencies, one may perhaps one day see a few distance teaching colleges operating internationally, utilising a combination of multinationally published print, satellite-based communication systems for voice transmission and electronic signalling, and local student support services. Such multinational operations may not always be easy, but there is enough evidence to suggest that it is feasible.

If such developments occur, then I envisage far greater levels of concern about cultural domination in the guise of distance education, and attendent concerns about bias and propoganda dressed up as information and education.

Conclusions

This paper has addressed the problems of utilising distance education for social justice programmes. Firstly, it has shown that while distance education can widen access to educational opportunities and particularly to the home-based learner, it can also be used to control physical access to education and thus force the student to be an isolated, segregated home-based learner. Secondly, while it can be used as a vehicle to spread education and enlightenment, it is also potentially a powerful means of propoganda and distortion. And, finally, there are the problems of multinational distance teaching institutions which are, I believe, only just beginning to come to the fore. Like most human endeavours, I would suggest that distance education can be used for good and ill, to promote social and economic justice, or to distort our vision of the world and to reinforce unjust social systems. If I voice some cautions, it is because I do not wish to see the good subverted by the bad. I am convinced that distance education can provide better education to more people for a given sum of money, than can any traditional educational system.

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